

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 OMB-01 AID-05

/057 W

----- 030258

R 161217Z AJN 76

FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3440

INFO USIA WASHDC

AMCONSUL BOMBAY

AMCONSUL CALCUTTA

AMCONSUL MADRAS

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE NEW DELHI 0844

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR

SUBJECT: GOI OFFICIAL COMMENTS ON COMBINED NEWS AGENCY, FOREIGN
NEWSMEN AND FOREIGN NEWS COVERAGE.

BEGIN SUMMARY: INFORMATION MINISTER SHUKLA ANSWERED RAJYA
SABHA QUESTION SAYING GOI WOULD NOT SET UP ITS OWN CONSOLIDATED
NEWS AGENCY BUT FAVORED A "VOLUNTARY MERGER OF NEWS AGENCIES."
AT SAME SESSION DEPUTY INFORMATION MINISTER SINHA EXPLAINED
THAT SIX FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT HAVE BEEN EXPELLED,
FIFTEEN HAVE BEEN NAMED FOR NO ENTRY TO INDIA AND ELEVEN HAVE
BEEN GIVEN WARNINGS ON CENSORSHIP VIOLATIONS. END SUMMARY.

1. THE ANSWERS TO MINISTER OF INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING,
V.C. SHUKLA AND DEPUTY MINISTER OF I & B, D.B. SINHA, TO
QUESTIONS IN THE RAJYA SABHA YESTERDAY, RECEIVED PROMINENT
PRESS COVERAGE ACROSS THE BOARD.

2. MR. SHUKLA IS REPORTED SAYING:

A. GOI IS NOT GOING TO GET UP ITS OWN NEWS AGENCY, BUT IT
WOULD SUPPORT A "VOLUNTARY MERGER" OF THE FOUR EXISTING NEWS
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SERVICES (PRESS TRUST OF INDIA, UNITED NEWS OF INDIA, HINDUSTAN SAMACHAR AND SAMACHAR BHARATI) TO FORM "A STRONG VIABLE AGENCY COMPLETELY INDEPENDENT OF GOVERNMENT-CONTROL." HE IS FURTHER REPORTED SAYING THAT NEWS AGENCIES AND RESOURCES "HAVE COME FORWARD FOR MERGING THEIR ASSTS AND RESOURCES TO FORM A NATIONAL NEWS AGENCY OF THEIR OWN."

THE MINISTER CLAIMED THAT "TWO AGENCIES HAVE PASSED RESOLUTIONS SUPPORTING THIS CONCEPT" --SAMACHAR BHARATI AND UNI. "OTHER NEWS AGENCY BOARDS ARE MEETING TO CONSIDER THIS MATTER." MR. SHUKLA FURTHER MAINTAINED THAT GOI "NEVER INTENDED" OR WANTED TO SET UP A GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED NEWS AGENCY. "IF WE WANTED, WE COULD HAVE TWISTED THEIR ARMS, BUT WE HAVE NO SUCH DESIRE."

(B) THE INFORMATION MINISTER CONTENDED THAT NEWS SUPPLIED BY UNI AND PTI DID NOT FULFIL "OUR REQUIREMENTS EITHER IN QUANTITY OR IN QUALITY." THIS WAS GIVEN AS THE REASON WHY THE GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED ALL INDIA RADIO WAS DISCONTINUING ITS SUBSCRIPTION TO PTI AND UNI FROM FEBRUARY 1, 1976. "THEIR COVERAGE OF INDIAN NEWS FOR THE FOREIGN PRESS HAD BEEN NEGLIBLE... THEIR NEWS HAD BEEN GENERALLY ELITE-BIASED AND ORIENTED TOWARD URBAN NEEDS. A FULL AND TRUTHFUL IMAGE TO HAPPENINGS IN INDIA HAD NOT BEEN PROJECTED TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE." HOWEVER, MR. SHUKLA ADDED, THE DECISION (DISCONTINUATION OF PTI AND UNI SERVICES) COULD BE REVIEWED "IF THERE ARE INDICATIONS OF SCOPE OF SUBSTANTIAL IMPROVEMENT IN THE SERVICES OF NEWS AGENCIES." CONTINUING, THE MINISTER SAID THAT PTI AND UNI ORIGINATED FROM FOREIGN AGENCIES LIKE REUTERS AND ASSOCIATED PRESS AND THEIR "WAY OF WORKING, FROM THE COUNTRY'S POINT OF VIEW, NOT OF GOVERNMENT, IS UNSATISFACTORY."

C. THE UPCOMING SINGLE NEWS AGENCY "WOULD BE FULLY AUTONOMOUS AND INDEPENDENT ... SO THAT WE DO NOT WANT ANYBODY TO FEEL THAT NEWS IS MANAGED OR CONTROLLED BY THE GOVERNMENT." IT "WOULD BE MUCH LESS AMENABLE TO PRESSURES OF VARIOUS KINDS OF HARRASSMENT EITHER FROM THE GOVERNMENT OR FROM BIG BUSINESS."

(D) ASKED WHETHER NEWS RELATING TO OPPOSITION PARTIES WAS BLACKED OUT BY GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED ALL INDIA RADIO AND TV, SHUKLA SAID THAT SINCE PRE-CENSORSHIP WAS LIFTED, IF NEWSPAPERS DID NOT PRINT ANYTHING ABOUT THE OPPOSITION PARTIES, THE LATER SHOULD FIGHT IT OUT WITH THE NEWSPAPERS. "WE ARE NOT CONSORING ANY OR INTERFERING WITH THE PUBLICATION OF ANY OPPOSITION NEWS, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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SO LONG AS THERE WAS NOTHING AGAINST SECURITY OR OUTSIDE THE LAW."

3. DEPUTY INFORMATION MINISTER D.B. SINHA'S STATEMENT
WAS ALSO REPORTED QUOTING HIM SAYING THAT "SIX FOREIGN COR-RESPONDENTS HAD BEEN EXPELLED SO FAR, INCLUDING TWO WHO DECLINED

TO FURNISH THE REQUIRED UNDERTAKING TO ABIDE BY THE CENSORSHIP ORDER. ENTRY INTO INDIA OF FIFTEEN FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS HAD BEEN BANNED. ELEVEN FOREIGN NEWSMEN HAD BEEN WARNED FOR VIOLATING CENSORSHIP REGULATIONS." HE SAID THE GOVERNMENT WAS ALSO LOOKING INTO THE MATTER OF TV'S USAGE OF MOSTLY WEST GERMAN TV NEWS PROGRAMS. GOI IS LOOKING INTO IT AND IS "TRYING TO LIMIT THE COVERAGE OF FOREIGN NEWS IN TV SERVICE."

COMMENT: IT SEEMS A FAIR AMOUNT OF HYPOCRISY IS PRESENT IN THIS EXPLANATION. IT IS COMMON KNOWLEDGE GOI HAS BEEN ANXIOUS TO GAIN A TIGHTER GRIP ON NEWS DISSEMINATION BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE OF INDIA. A SINGLE, CONTROLLED NEWS AGENCY HAS BEEN RUMORED SINCE THE EARLY DAYS OF THE EMERGENCY. MORE RECENTLY THE FINANCIAL PROBLEMS OF BOTH MAJOR AGENCIES (PTI AND UNI) HAVE BEEN CITED AS REASON FOR A MERGER, BUT WE LEARN THIS IS DUE, IN NO SMALL PART, TO GOI'S FINANCIAL MANIPULATIONS. RENTAL FEES FOR BOTH SERVICES, WHICH ARE USED IN AIR'S NEWS ROOMS FOR RADIO AND TELEVISION, AS WELL NUMEROUS GOVERNMENT OFFICES IN DELHI AND ELSEWHERE, WERE ARBITRARILY SET BY GOI AT A FIGURE SUBSTANTIALLY BELOW WHAT IS CHARGED OTHER SUBSCRIBERS. PAYMENTS FOR THESE ARE OFTEN IN ARREARS. BY PROVIDING OFFICIAL ENCOURAGEMENT TO A NEW CONSOLIDATED NEWS AGENCY, WHICH APPEARS AS THOUGH MOTIVATED BY THE WIRE SERVICES THEMSELVES, GOI SEEMS ABOUT TO ACHIEVE ITS PURPOSE, WITHOUT THE ONUS OF DIRECT CREATION. THERE WILL BE NO QUESTION OF WHERE CONTROL OF SUCH AN AGENCY LIES. IT REMAINS UNCERTAIN HOW THE NEW AGENCY WILL DEAL WITH EXISTING CONTRACTS WITH FOREIGN PRESS AGENCIES HELD BY THE PRESENT WIRE SERVICE AGENCIES.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 JAN 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: CENSORSHIP, INFORMATION CONTROL, INFORMATION MEDIA, JOURNALISTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 16 JAN 1976
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: KelleyW0
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1976NEWDE00844
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: n/a
Errors: n/a
Film Number: D760019-0494
From: NEW DELHI
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1976/newtext/t19760193/aaaageha.tel
Line Count: 147
Locator: TEXT ON MICROFILM, TEXT ON-LINE
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: KelleyW0
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 21 JUL 2004
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <21 JUL 2004 by coburnhl>; APPROVED <28 OCT 2004 by KelleyW0>
Review Markings:

Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
04 MAY 2006

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: <DBA CORRECTED> srp 970919
Subject: GOI OFFICIAL COMMENTS ON COMBINED NEWS AGENCY, FOREIGN NEWSMEN AND FOREIGN NEWS COVERAGE.
TAGS: PFOR, SOPN, IN, (SHUKLA, V C)
To: STATE INFO BOMBAY
CALCUTTA
MULTIPLE
USIA
Type: TE
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 04 MAY 2006

